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## **The Things You Never Did Because You Might Die Trying**

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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December, 2009

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## **Artist Statement**

My work is about the military. I represent my views of the military from my perspective as a military wife, sister, and daughter. The themes are about separation, endurance, and the fragility that lies beneath the people who serve, and the people that support them. It's about pain, violence, anxiety, and fear, as well as pride and honor. I want my work to enhance the view of the military but also depict its hardships.

# **The Things You Never Did Because You Might Die Trying**

## **Introduction**

As a licensed art teacher, I decided to enroll in the Art Education graduate program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) but quickly realized it wasn't going to work for me. I switched to the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) degree program, which focuses on studio practices. I'm glad I did. Because of my switch, I was able to take classes in a wide range of disciplines, learning more about art history, general education, and studio arts. I've worked with a variety of professors and found each experience intensely difficult and highly rewarding to me as an adult student. One of the most important things I've learned is that by seeking out knowledge I found more out about myself, as well as others. My graduate school experience has been as much about life lessons as a degree for me.

Starting graduate school at twenty-six seemed like the natural next step for me. However, I am a military wife and my husband was unexpectedly deployed for the greater part of the last four years. The responsibilities of raising our young son alone, keeping up with the maintenance that comes with homeownership, and trying to work towards my own goals has proven to be a great challenge. I've made sacrifices and learned much about compromise and balance. This degree has been all the more meaningful for me while juggling all these new adult experiences that make up my life. That is why my artwork for this program is about just that, my life and the struggles of military soldiers and their families.

## **Subject Matter**

During my coursework, I concentrated on mixed media arts and discovered new ways of presenting my ideas about military life. I used specific portraiture in composing situations and scenes. My intentions were to represent military soldiers in a wide range of job-related and personal situations. I wanted to show the events they go through and also the illusions that they have, as they lead productive and happy lives. I wanted to show the fragility of their actual lives and their emotional states of mind.

Being in the military is a lifestyle, not just a career. Most people can never fully understand what soldiers and their families go through. I want my work to teach people more about it. If I could find a metaphor for describing military life, I might choose a roller coaster ride, but even a roller coaster has some predictability; if you've ridden it a few times, you know what to expect. A military family just never knows what will be thrown at them, where they might move to, how long they will be in a certain city, or with a group of friends. As a part of a military family, I essentially have no control over the exterior and material aspects of much of what my life will be like. This forced me to make certain emotional decisions early on about how I would live and what my outlook would be. I want to create a dialogue about these issues in my work. I want there to be a sense of anxiety in the work because that is what I live with on a daily basis. I also want there to be a sense of glory, fun, pride, danger, and fragility.

There are incredible emotional highs and advantages to being in a military family. It has given me a greater sense of self, inner courage, and determination. I believe that's why I use three layers in my mixed media wall hangings and have felt drawn to using

quilting as my medium. I want to represent multiple layers of self, as well as a physical sense of the human body. The backbone that it takes to survive military life both physically and emotionally is the canvas; the fragility and emotional instability is the inner cloth, batting and the upper most level of paper or fabric; and, the final layer is the thread that holds everything together. The layered structure of my work acts as a metaphor for my own feelings and emotions. It is a representation of the human body and spirit, both strong and fragile at the same time. The medium also holds a sense of domestication which is a big part of my life right now.

## **Symbolism**

The symbols in my work are the photographic images of human beings. These images can be read as depicting individuals and as indicators of emotions and ideas. They are soldiers, women and men. I also use guns because they are a commonly used weapon in the military and can be found on a regular basis on soldiers. My husband once said that a soldier “is” his weapon and that stuck with me. For instance, in the piece “*I am my gun*” (Appendix, 1), the gun image blends with the images of soldiers. It is hard to tell where one ends and where the other begins, literally and figuratively. I placed the face of a soldier in the location of the trigger of the gun.

In much of my work, as in *Soldier briefing* (Appendix, 2), I use thread as a linear element to represent life, the space around people, and the continuation from one object to another. This line symbolizes the physical and emotional glue that holds everything together. Both this piece and *Sea of soldiers* (Appendix, 3) are the image of soldiers

waiting or gathering to listen to further instructions or to be debriefed. The massive number of soldiers was sobering to me as I thought about how many thousands of soldiers are being cycled through the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The image of so many soldiers begins to blend in my mind in a non-distinctive outline of a human head. It almost feels as if I'm no longer clear as to which is an American soldier and which is the enemy. The idea that we are all human but fighting for different reasons begins to resonate with me in these images. The thread changes colors in *Sea of soldiers* and represents the emotional chaos and political ambiguity of sides that begin to occur when war drags on and on over years.

In the piece *EKG line of soldiers* (Appendix, 4), the thread began out as simply a line; then I began to manipulate it to create the image of a soldier walking through a reconnaissance mission. I used the thread to create partial outlines of soldiers bodies and to wrap around whole figures. These lines represent the EKG or lifeline of lost soldiers, dead and alive. Some are still being searched for, while others are just gone.

I also use materials symbolically. For example in *Fallen Soldier* (Appendix, 5), the weakened batting symbolizes the fragility of the human body and loss of strength in the fallen soldier. His comrade grips his head where the paper is sewn down but the paper naturally pulls away from the thread more and more over time. This situation is similar to human beings who are forced to pull away emotionally when someone dies. In some areas the paper and batting just barely hangs on, like an injured soldier or a military family member waiting for their significant other to return.

My decision to use black and white in the photographic images is intentional. It



represents the ideology that life can be divided into black and white, or simple right and wrong categories. I contradict this belief by using colored thread, the very thing that is holding the black and white paper to the rest of the artwork. I do this to imply that black and white beliefs do not exist without the color, or the emotional dramas that create them. They go hand in hand. In other words, soldiers cannot spend the time to overanalyze things that could be life and death to them or other soldiers around them. They don't always find themselves in the position to have the luxury of contemplating subtle moral decisions. However, they do have to plan and strategize events that will affect others. The life of a soldier is more complex than what most people assume to be "robot-like figures" taking orders on command, without thinking. I want to take people away from the stereotypes we see in the media and reveal a more realistic story.

### **Techniques and Processes**

The technique of making my pieces is very organic and intuitive. I tend to develop work as a result of personal experiences and musings about military life. My reactions vary according to the circumstances and I have found that working in this spontaneous manner allows me to express more conceptual ideas. For example, *Soldiers sleeping on a cargo plane* (Appendix, 6) is a piece which comes from a combination of my emotional experience and a desire to show an aspect of military travel. When I first saw this picture of military men sleeping on a cargo plane, I was taken back by how normal they looked. In my mind's eye, I always thought of soldiers as heroes who were constantly battling for hours on end and never getting tired. My mental image, compared

with the actual one of soldiers traveling, somehow woke me up from my fantasy and snapped me into reality. This made me realize that soldiers are just human beings, fragile and sleepy like the rest of us. However, there is one real difference, they are much closer to death.

Creating *Female soldier* (Appendix, 7) was another experience occurred for me. Because I'm a female, I wanted to depict the image of a female soldier. In this image the soldier is holding a gun, and the only identifying female trait is the bun on the back of her head. This image spoke to me and made me think twice about my own life, remembering the women who serve in the military and how they too must put on brave faces during their work in the field or at war away from their families. They too must switch back into military moms or sisters, or wives at home. The image of a female somehow reminded me that I was not alone in my struggles as a woman. The techniques of making the gun in this image were particularly fun for me because the entire time I was thinking about how I could make it prettier or more colorful for the female soldier in the image.

My actual process involves finding images that prompt a reaction in me. Next, I photocopy and enlarge the pictures. I then use canvas and quilter's batting to create the body of the piece and give the image substantial presence. The batting also serves an important symbolic purpose. When I tear away the photocopied image, there lies the fragile, soft batting, which represents the inner truth behind the misconceptions we all have about military life. I also tear it in a way that looks like a wound or an injury. The batting is ripped at the edges and the thread lines hang down uncut, unclean, and both things are left in the raw to indicate the lack of control any of us really has over when we

die. They represent the unclean, chaotic messes that are the reality of war.

I sew all three layers together with a technique called bobbin work. In this technique what would typically be the back of a fabric piece is now being viewed as the front. I start sewing and tracing the outlines of the images, thinking about what part of the image I want to keep and what I will tear or cut away. Later, I rip the paper off in a very controlled way. The result is a combination of sewed and ripped off areas that are features of my narrative. Next, I continue the controlled ripping by tearing the batting and cutting the canvas. This element of destruction is important to the overall symbolic message of my work. Finally, I collect all the excess batting and store it until I exhibit the pieces. The scraps are intended to be scattered on the floor under my work to represent the loss of life, the loss of spirit, the loss of family, and the fragility of it all.

## **Quilts**

My quilts are also about the military and they represent my emotional life. I use color, patterns, and textures as symbolic elements. I hand-dyed all the fabrics used and sketched and created all the design and compositions.

Red is a color I often use in the quilts because it traditionally represents blood, rage, and anger. I see the anger in red as a personal symbol of interruption. This is the interruption I experience in my life due to military circumstances. It also is the interruption soldiers face in their civilian and emotional lives from living under such stressful conditions that force them into conflicting situations.

Many of the fabrics I used had a bold texture and a bright color palette. I also used

materials such as fencing, wire, and stencils. I used spray bottles of paint to create dyed fabrics depicting blood. To create other visual textures and patterns, I depicted images of guns, faces of soldiers in a mass sea of troops, and barbed wire. These images, along with geometric lines and other shapes, create visual texture and pattern intended to instill a sense of general chaos and fear.

The quilts are made using the techniques of piecing, appliqué, and embroidery. I bind the edges, allowing nothing to hang off the borders or appear ripped. Although I bind the edges, their size and shape are purposefully uneven. They are made to look somewhat awkward. I don't want any image to be too perfect because I don't believe anything or any belief is unflawed. The imperfection in my work is designed to represent this idea.

In *Reconnaissance dreaming* (Appendix, 8) and *Reconnaissance in the desert* (Appendix, 9) I use strong, high-saturated colors and patterns to indicate emotion and movement. Both pieces feature the military act of reconnaissance missions, in which soldiers are sent to do a specific task that often finds them wandering for hours in vast open areas. I thought this activity was something that could represent both the mission of the military and the lack of direction and sense of loss that soldiers can experience. I use this image of soldiers on reconnaissance missions over and over for these reasons.

## **Influences**

Artists that influence me are quilt, textile, and fiber artists. One contemporary textile and quilt artist, Bella Kaplan, is a particular influence to me. She is an Israeli artist

who lived and raised her family in Galilee. She experienced life in a area of the world where conflict and war brought military personnel to her area. At times, she and her family were forced to live in bomb shelters. Her quilts reflect her experiences living in this chaotic region. Living in a state of anxiety doesn't seem like something to envy, but there is something about it that is important to me. There is a wisdom that comes with a lifestyle or a suffering that leads to a heightened awareness of ones' blessings. With some kinds of suffering comes knowledge and strength.

Another contemporary quilter and artist that is an inspiration is Patricia Mink. Her technique of using digitally printed images with quilting on top of them is a process that I have also incorporated into my own work. Of particular interest to me is her technique of photographing the surfaces of old walls and then printing these images onto typically soft fabrics. She then uses these fabrics for her quilts. By using these images, she is addressing the issues of deterioration and reconstruction. This idea and process appealed to me and it influenced me to take images of the military and sew them onto fragile, softer fabrics.

Elizabeth Poole, another contemporary quilt artist, is known for having quilted several large scale, cropped bodies using multiple layers of fabrics. The cropped bodies are then simplified into a few particular colors or fabrics. She dyes all of her own fabric and then uses appliquéd techniques to attach all the layers. She influenced me in the way she crops the figure and uses a limited palette. Her approaches led me to think of the various layers of fabric as metaphorical layers of the human body and spirit.

Finally, Julia Pfaff, an adjunct professor in the MIS program and a textile

designer and quilt artist, directly influenced my technical approach. Her work also incorporates layers of self-applied texture, rubbings, stenciling, and embroidery. It was her embroidery work that most influenced my use of thread as a binding element as well as a symbolic drawing element.

These artists and my lifestyle are what affect my work. Being surrounded by other military families members, seeing how different people handle different situations, and determining how I fit in this culture makes me who I am. It allows me to create work about what is important to me and important for me to share. These artists helped me learn to express my ideas in a manner that best fits my points of view.

## **Conclusion**

I know that I will continue to strive to seek out multiple truths in various life situations. My husband will come home from active military duty and return to his civilian job and my life will change again. Other opportunities and events will occur and those things will shape my life, influence me, and present issues that I'll explore in my artwork. I'm just beginning to create work that I hope will grow and mature as I keep making it. The MIS program has provided many opportunities to me. I have learned that if I'm willing to work hard, I can produce something I'm proud of and that is personally fulfilling.

As an art educator, I appreciate the information I learned in the MIS program. As an adult, mother, wife, and military family member, being able to express myself through art during a tough couple of years has been invaluable. I feel very fortunate and grateful

for having been able to complete my graduate studies.

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Figure 1. *"I am my gun"*, mixed media, 21"x19", 2009.



Figure 2. *Soldier briefing*, mixed media, 15"x14", 2009.



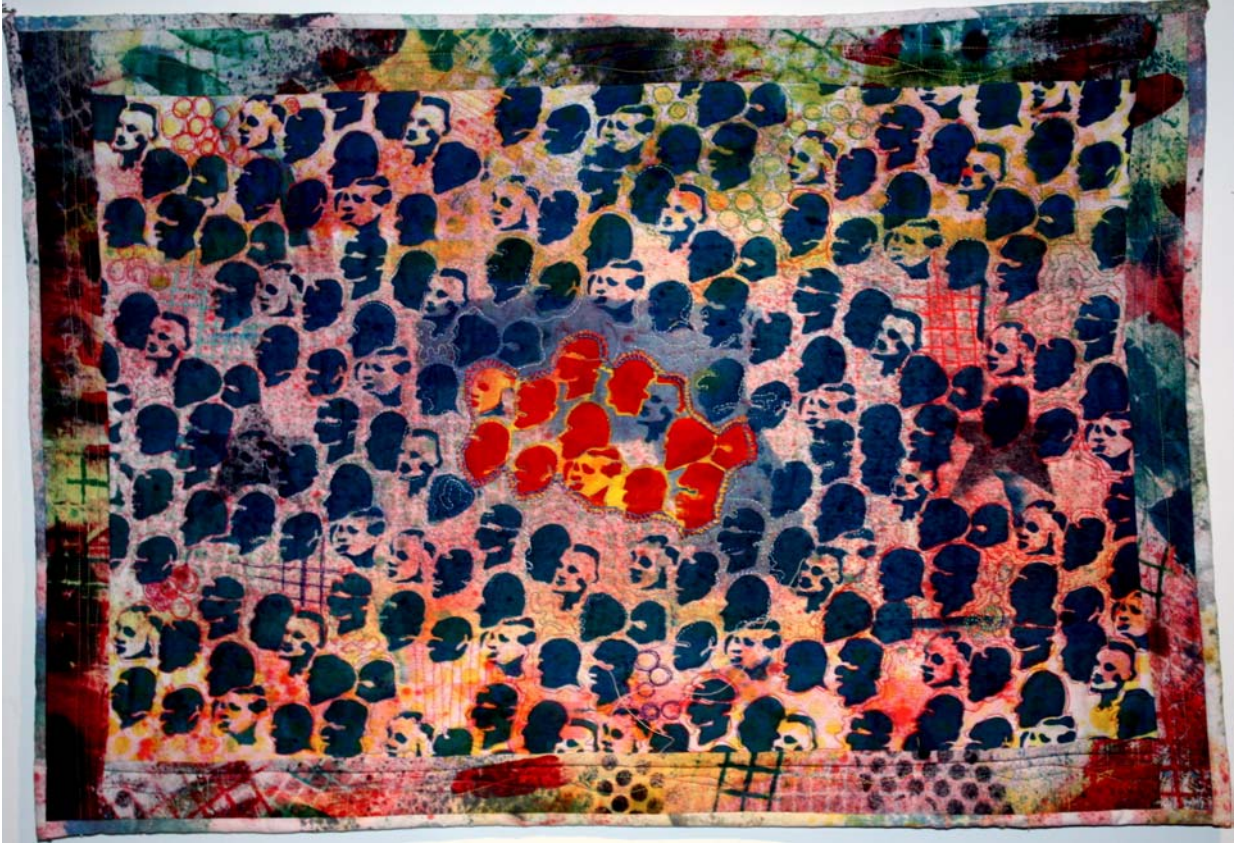


Figure 3. *Sea of soldiers*, mixed media, 19.5"x29", 2009.



Figure 4. *EKG line of soldiers*, mixed media, 18"x19", 2009.



Figure 5. *Fallen Soldier*, mixed media, 20"x10", 2009.





Figure 6. *Soldiers sleeping on a cargo plane*, mixed media, 15"x19", 2009.



Figure 7. *Female soldier*, mixed media, 17"x15", 2009.





Figure 8. *Reconnaissance dreaming*, mixed media, 14"x21". 2009.



Figure 9. *Reconnaissance in the desert*, mixed media, 33"x21", 2009.

## **Kylene Susan Craig Thompson**

### **EDUCATION:**

- 2009 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Painting and Crafts.  
2002 Bachelor of Art, Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, VA. Painting, Graphic Design and Art History

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2004-2005 Art Teacher, Wilder Middle School, Henrico County Public Schools, VA.

### **RELATED EXPERIENCE:**

- 2002 Art Teacher and Program Coordinator, Arlington Parks and Recreation, Arlington, VA.  
2001-2002 Graphic Designer, The Staunton Bulletin, Staunton, VA.

### **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:**

- 2005-2009 Bon Air Artists Association, Richmond, VA.  
2007-2009 Parent Teacher Association, Chesterfield County Schools, VA.  
2009 Collaborative Arts Group, Richmond, VA.  
2004-2009 National Art Education Association.  
2004-2009 Virginia Art Education Association

### **EXHIBITIONS:**

- 2009 *Mixed Media Wall Hangings*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Bon Air, VA.  
2009 Collaborative Group Show, mixed media piece, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA.  
2004 *Recent Works: Portraits*, St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Bon Air, VA.  
2002 *Senior Show Portraits*, Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, VA.